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A STUDY OF MODERN PESSIMISM.

I.

The sadness, deepening into despair of life present and to come, that has been the burden of much modern poetry and has been formulated into a would-be philosophic creed was latent in the romanticism that flourished in the opening years of the present century — which in its turn was an outgrowth of that phase of idealism that is linked with the memory of Schelling. The inheritance of pessimism from this source was both theoretic and practical: the theory of a World-Soul rising to self-consciousness in man; the intense individualism; the revolutionary spirit, opposing itself to all established forms political, ecclesiastical and social, to all conventional morality, literature and art — these primary characteristics of romanticism were directly transmitted, while its enthusiasm, quickly spent and realizing little; its energy of exploration, pushing out boldly into new seas of thought and often meeting nothing but shipwreck and loss; its ideals of social improvement and the regeneration of the race, foredoomed to failure by their very loftiness; its high aims thwarted and eager aspirations dashed with disappointment — these left a sense of failure and of the hopelessness of effort and scepticism as to the power of goodness and the existence of a good power in the world as a practical legacy to pessimism.

Historic events confirmed in an emphatic manner this conviction that the romantic ideal was unattainable. The hopes of hosts of high-spirited youths centred in the person of Napoleon, and their disappointment was bitter when he proved recreant to their faith and assumed the imperial crown. Beethoven expressed their emotions with consummate power in his Third Symphony, the first musical revelation of pessimism. After Napoleon's downfall the old, bad order of things was reestablished as far as possible through-

out Europe. The pope was reinstated in Rome and restored the Jesuit order: in his counsels the narrow and reactionary policy of Pacca triumphed over the progressive and enlightened views of Consalvi. The Bourbons returned to the thrones of France, Spain, and the Two Sicilies: the Inquisition was set up in Spain, the White Terror reigned in France. In the east of Europe the emperors of Russia and Austria and the king of Prussia concluded the Holy Alliance which, however noble in conception, soon became known as simply an instrument for the summary suppression of all liberal movements. In England wide-spread distress in agricultural districts followed the battle of Waterloo, and in towns where factory operatives had been thrown out of work by the introduction of machinery, there were riots, machine-breaking, incendiary fires, and rumors of treasonable conspiracies that terrified the government into harshly repressive measures that culminated in the suspension of the Habeas Corpus Act.

This universal popular discontent, aggravated by the suspicious and sternly reactionary attitude of governments intent upon maintaining their authority at all costs, was the very hot-bed of pessimism. There was a pre-disposition to it, as we have seen, from the century's earliest years: the year 1815 may be referred to as the time when it became clearly defined. Then it was that the stormy and passionate genius of Byron voiced, in full strains of a melody and beauty unknown before in European literature, the pent-up misery of the age. In his lyrical outbursts are to be found the ideas upon which later poets rang the changes over all Europe, out of which was constructed a system of pessimistic thought. He sang of the cruelty of the world, "the war of the many with one," the disenchantment that comes with experience, the faded illusions, the hopelessness of the search for happiness, of "the weariness that springs" from everything seen or heard by the diseased in mind, of the vain attempts to escape from self, the "detested yoke" of life, "the worm, the canker, and the grief,"

and the end of all—nothingness. In the dramas “Manfred” and “Cain” these ideas and emotions found their most tremendous expression, up to Cain’s wild curse upon Him who invented life that leads to death. The same inhuman bitterness of spirit breathes in the prolonged curse of Eve and in that of the dying doge in the last act of “Marino Faliero.” At last, when the wretchedness of the disappointed seeker after pleasures of sense and intellect had worn itself out in maledictions and cries of despair, came a change of mood, and the poet directed his great powers to mockery of all that men hold sacred, to indiscriminating satire and ribaldry, in “Beppo” and “Don Juan.”

So melancholy was Byron’s emotional history, and his views of life were presented with passion and pathos, eloquence and humor that astonished and captivated literary Europe. By his side moved Shelley, a spirit of far finer mold, chanting in purer, sweeter, and no less poignantly unhappy tones the pain that comes from apprehension of an unattainable ideal. The transiency of beauty and pleasure, the fruitlessness of seeking satisfaction in the real, eternal unrest and change, were the burden of his song:

We are as clouds that veil the midnight moon:
How restlessly they speed and gleam and quiver,
Streaking the darkness radiantly! Yet soon
Night closes round and they are lost forever . . .

We look before and after,
And pine for what is not;
Our sincerest laughter
With some pain is fraught,
Our sweetest songs are those that tell of saddest thought.

The composer Schubert yielded concurrent testimony: “Our sweetest songs”, he said, “are the product of pain, and it is those that the great world likes the best.”

The flower that smiles to-day
To-morrow dies;
All that we wish to stay
Tempts and then flies;

What is this world's delight?
Lightning that mocks the night,
Brief even as bright . . .

Out of the day and night
A joy has taken flight;
Fresh spring and summer and winter hoar
Move my faint heart with grief, but with delight
No more — O, never more!

The laments of English poets were echoed from the Italy they loved. Rarely has such depression of spirit been revealed as charges the few but almost faultless poems of Leopardi. In him we discern the natural connection between despairing views of life and physical weakness. As a boy Leopardi was sickly. Misunderstood by his parents and neglected, or only noticed by way of rebuke, his only solace was found in his father's library. There he lived, devouring the Greek and Roman classics, until his eyes grew so weak that sight would often fail him for months at a time. He read of the ancient glory of Rome and the ideal thus presented made him feel more keenly the misery of the Italy of his day. This sentiment inspired his famous Ode to his country of the year 1819, a composition that greatly offended his father and subjected him to severer restrictions than before. The unhappy poet grew morbid in body and mind: he suffered from insomnia and dulness of hearing. He longed for death, yet strangely enough was haunted by a dread of cholera. He died of dropsy when but thirty-eight years of age.

This sickliness of constitution intensified in Leopardi to a painful degree that self-consciousness that has been noted as one of the legacies of romanticism. His life reminds one of the punishment of those unfortunates in Dante's *Inferno* who burn with desire but can never obtain. Leopardi longed for pleasure but was too feeble to enjoy. With the "illusions" of faith and hope vanished also in him all nobility of soul.

He harped upon the doctrine — which Bichat was inculcating in medical circles at Paris — that all life is but a

progress toward death: that as soon as a man is born he begins to die:

Vecchiezza e morte
Han principio d'allor che il labbro infante
Preme il tenero sen che vita instilla.

His lines to his sister Paolina upon her marriage suggest, felicitously, that it is a grave mistake to bring new beings into a world of wretchedness:

Aure soavi
L'empio fato interdice
All'umana virtude . . .
O miseri o codardi
Figliuoli avrai, Miseri eleggi. Immenso
Tra fortuna e valor dissidio pose
Il corrotto costume. Ahi troppo tardi
E nella sera dell'umane cose
Acquista oggi chi nasce il moto e il senso.

'Tis a "secol tetro" in spite of its vaunted progress and though it has made steam its servant it is still, spiritually, an iron age. Inventions, machinery, the printing press, *et cetera* have failed to alleviate the misery of mankind.

Amara e noja
La vita, altro mai nulla; e fango è il mondo.
Peri l' inganno estremo
Ch' eterno io mi credei . . .
Al gener nostro il fato
Non donò che il morire. Omai disprezza
Te, la natura, il brutto
Poter, che, ascoso, a comun danno impera
E l' infinita vanità del tutto.

In Germany the gospel of poetic pessimism was proclaimed by Heinrich Heine, a Jew, who having been educated by Jesuit fathers in the gymnasium at Düsseldorf, passed to the university at Göttingen, was rusticated, brought out a volume of poems, returned to the university and made profession of Christianity that he might get his degree in law. In the revolutionary year, 1830, his freedom of criticism in a political review he was editing at Munich made him so obnoxious to the government that he

had to leave the country. He went to Paris, where he spent the latter half of a life of which the last seven years were a life in death upon a "mattress grave" — he was prostrated by softening of the spinal cord.

Consummate literary art would seem to be an endowment of the melancholy temperament, and of this kind of compensation Heine affords a palpable illustration. His poems are all short, most of them very short, some of the best consisting of only two quatrains. They run over with all the music of which the German language is capable and prove indeed how sweet that harsh tongue can become. Some of the least in length are fullest of suggestion, simple in the extreme and of inimitable grace :

Ein Fichtenbaum steht einsam
Im Norden auf kahler Höh'.
Ihn schläfert; mit weisser Decke
Umhüllen ihn Eis und Schnee.

Er träumt von einer Palme
Die fern im Morgenland
Einsam und schweigend trauert
Auf brennender Felsenwand.

His earliest pieces were laden with sadness; a youth of only nineteen or twenty years, he longed for easeful death :

Mein Herz ist krank und wund
Und die Glieder matt und träge;
Schlepp' ich fort am Wanderstab
Bis mein müdes Haupt ich lege
Ferne in ein kühles Grab . . .
Im Grab ist Ruh!

The burden of these songs was restless, unrequited, or frustrated love :

Vergiftet sind meine Lieder;
Wie könnt es anders sein?
Ich trage im Herzen viel Schlangen
Und dich, Geliebte mein.

"I, unhappy Atlas," he complained, "must carry a world, the whole world of pain; I endure the intolerable

and the heart in my body will break. Proud heart, thou wouldst have it so! Thou wouldst be happy, infinitely happy, or infinitely wretched—and so thou art wretched, proud heart!”

He summed up his pessimistic creed in a short piece in blank verse, “Götterdämmerung.” It is a morning in May, the sun shines bright, the air is full of fragrance—but there is no joy in his heart; he has seen through the world and its vanity and eternal pain possesses him. He has looked into the hearts of men and found in them only deceit and misery; in their countenances he reads bad thoughts; in the maiden’s blush of shame he sees a motion of secret desire; on the head of the high-spirited youth his fancy sets a party-colored fool’s cap. The world is full of caricatures and sickly shadows:

Ich weiss nicht
Ist sie ein Tollhaus oder Krankenhaus.

He looks under the rind of the earth and sees the dead in their coffins, their folded hands and staring eyes: through their lips yellow worms crawl. At last the giants make war on God and his angels and invade heaven; earth and heaven crash together and old Night rules over all.

The last act of this strange, sad history of “a heart full of sorrow, a head full of doubt” was pitiable indeed but not novel—we have noted a like conclusion in Byron’s case. Heine’s soliloquy reminds us of Byron’s on the completion of his thirty-sixth year.

Tag und Nacht hab’ ich gedichtet
Und hab’ doch Nichts ausgerichtet:
Bin in Harmonien geschwommen
Und bin doch zu Nichts gekommen.

He became at last a mere ribald; his verses rang with joyless, mocking laughter, his satire degenerated into vulgarity, the last trace of the ideal vanished and with it went his self-respect. He sneered at love and wrote doggerel. The curtain fell, not too soon, upon the bitter comedy of his life:

In mir lebt nur noch der Tod.
Der Vorhang fällt, das Stück ist aus,
Und gähnend wandelt jetzt nach Haus
Mein liebes deutsches Publikum.

What wonder that, as his editor attests, few followed his coffin to the grave!

Of nobler soul was the Magyar poet, Nicolaus Lenau, whose youth was saddened by hopeless love and whose last years were clouded by insanity. Lenau was peculiarly sensitive to the beauty of nature in her various aspects, but nothing brought him peace. He was penetrated by the loveliness of spring, but in the midst of its enjoyment was filled with regret at its transiency:

Holder Lenz, du bist dahin,
Nirgends, nirgends darfst du bleiben!

Autumn chimed best with his melancholy spirit:

Wie der Wind so traurig fuhr
Durch den Strauch, als ob er weine;
Sterbeseufzer der Natur
Schauern durch die welken Haine . . .
Treulich bringt ein jedes Jahr
Welkes Laub und welches Hoffen.

In winter he longed to die like nature. As he wandered one moon-lit winter night through a snowy pine wood he prayed, importunately:

Frost! friere mir ins Herz hinein,
Tief in das heissbewegte, wilde,
Dass einmal Ruh mag drinnen sein
Wie hier im nächtlichen Gefilde!

In the year 1832 he visited America but caught nothing of the hopeful spirit of the new world.

O Menschenherz, was ist dein Glück?
— Ein räthselhaft geborner
Und, kaum gegrüsst, verlorn
Unwiederholter Augenblick!

Death is the only sure refuge for the tender of heart,—to sheltering death they flee, as children to a mother, from the unhappiness that ever pursues them:

Jägt sie Unglück, wie zum Fluche,
 Fliehn sie bang und immer bänger,
 Bis sie hinter 'm Leichentuche
 Sich verbergen ihrem Dränger.

Slavic literature has helped to swell the wailing chorus. There seems to be in the breast of the Russian a predisposition to melancholy that has been deepened by ages of oppression. The despotism of the Czar Nicholas greatly aggravated it: during his reign it was the burden of Russian poetry and has since been transmuted into the sombre realism of Russian fiction. Alexander Pushkin, the first great poet of that great empire, was almost exactly a contemporary of Leopardi. On leaving college at the age of eighteen he plunged for three years into the dissipations of the gayest society of St. Petersburg — then of a sudden banished himself into the wilds of Bessarabia. In his lines to Ovid he tells us that like the Roman poet, but unlike him a willing exile, dissatisfied with the world, with himself, with life, he has come into the wilderness. Unlike Ovid's too, he says, is his feeble genius which will die with his sad life,— his name will be forgotten by future generations. (Two have passed already and his fame is more general than ever.) Pushkin was dominated by the genius of Byron: in his lines "To the Sea" is a suggestion of "Childe Harold"; he wrote too "The Stony Guest," inspired doubtless by "Don Juan." In Bessarabia he composed the "Fountain of Baktchissarai," one of the exquisite works of modern literature, magical in its beauty and pathos. Its theme is the transiency of an enchanting ideal.

Pushkin perished in a duel, but his mantle fell upon Lermontof. The spirit of the poor young poet Kolzof, a contemporary of theirs, was daunted and depressed by the enigma of the universe.

Despondency seems congenital with Hungarians and Poles; it was exacerbated by the cruel suppression of the Polish insurrection of 1830-'31 by the Czar Nicholas and of the Hungarian revolution by Austria, with Nicholas'

help, in 1849. "The world is but a general hospital," sighed the young patriot and poet Petöfi Sandor, who was slain in the latter struggle when but twenty-nine years of age.

The malign fascination of Byron's verse led captive from his boyhood the Parisian poet Alfred de Musset. In a noteworthy little piece, "*La Nuit de Décembre*," de Musset indicated the cause of the "moral sickness of the age." The "*malheureux vêtu de noir*" appearing and re-appearing in that poem was the author's double, his hapless better self, revealed in moments of sadness and solitude. It was the ceaseless conflict between the real and the ideal; the struggle waged within the personality between the higher and lower natures, between faith and unsanctified understanding, the issue of which was too often the triumph of the latter, that was the cause of the mental pain and pessimism of the century. This antagonism, rending asunder the fair unity of life that was the classic ideal, was the immediate product of romanticism.

De Musset was nourished upon the literature of despair; Byron was his hero, Leopardi his admiration. His voluptuous nature was revealed in his stanzas on Venice (the city that exerted over his hero so baleful an attraction) composed in his nineteenth year. A "swoon of delight" was the supreme aim of his young life; careless of present and future he cried

Allons, vive l'amour que l'ivresse accompagne!
Chantons Bacchus, l'amour, et la folie!

The subject of his poem "*Rolla*" was the "worst debauchee of Paris" who, having run through his fortune in three years, when he felt "the viper in his heart" poisoned himself. That piece described its author's awakening from his dream of pleasure and the nausea that followed such abuse of the senses.

J' ai perdu ma force et ma vie
Et mes amis et ma gaieté . . .
Quand je l' ai comprise et sentie
J' en étais déjà dégoûté . . .

Car sais tu, seulement pour vivre,
Combien il m'a fallu pleurer?
De cet ennui qui désenivre
Combien en mon cœur dévorer? . . .

Le seul bien qui me reste au monde
Est d'avoir quelquefois pleuré.

"Mon rêve s'est enfui" he wailed, and it left him (to use his own terrible expression) "avec un cancer dans le cœur," and before him

Une croix en poussière et le désert aux cieux.

He would lay the blame upon his "faithless age":

Ta gloire est morte, ô Christ!
Nous, vieillards nés d'hier, qui nous rajeunira?

And yet belief in God and the life to come could never be entirely extinguished in his soul, though it stirred only to fill him with fresh fears:

Malgré moi l'infini me tourmente.

Pitiful was the strife between his reason and his heart; he tried to reassure himself by the sceptic's argument: if heaven be empty, we offend not whatever we do; if there be a God, he must be merciful; and concluded in a strain that shows how inextinguishable is faith:

Pourquoi fais Tu douter de Toi?
Pourquoi as Tu créé le mal si grand? . . .
La doute a désolé la terre, . . .
Mais si nos angoisses mortelles
Jusqu' à Toi peuvent parvenir —

Brise cette voûte profonde
Qui couvre la création;
Soulève les voiles du monde
Et montre Toi, Dieu juste et bon!

No nation has been left untouched by the "disease of the century"; none has been more politically distracted than unhappy Spain, whence issued a note of intense anguish, defiance, and despair — the poetry of José de Espronceda. De Musset showed how license leads to doubt;

Espronceda, born the same year as his compeer of France, illustrated the inverse process, doubt leading to license. His verse is comparable to Leopardi's in scantiness of quantity and perfection of form. Espronceda manifested the connection, before noted, of pessimism with disappointed political aspirations. He was the son of a colonel in the Spanish army and his life was spent in political agitation and the storms of revolution. Released from imprisonment at Madrid, he escaped to Lisbon, but was there again imprisoned. Again set free, he fled to England, where he got acquainted with Byron's poetry. He was in Paris during the revolution of July, 1830; returned to Spain and was embroiled in the political disturbances of 1835-36. He died suddenly at Madrid at the age of thirty-two.

Ever in pursuit of divine delight, as his poems tell, he continually confounded it, to his sorrow, with reality, and instead of meadows waving with flowers found only dry deserts; in what seemed beauty afar off he found, near to, nothing but corruption. Yet his desire was insatiable, though he expected peace only in the tomb.

His "Estudiante de Salamanca" is a continuation of the Don Juan story and is introduced, appropriately, by a quotation from Byron's work.

En mi muera el sentimiento . . .
En un mar de lava hirviente
Mi cabeza siento arder . . .
Qué la virtud, la pureza,
Que la verdad y el cariño?
— Mentida ilusion de niño
Que halago mi juventud.

Dad me vino — en el se ahoguen
Mis recuerdos; aturdida
Sin sentir huya la vida —
Paz me traiga el ataúd.

Muere infeliz! la vida es un tormento,
Un engaño el placer; no hay en la tierra
Paz para ti, ni dicha, ni contento
Sino eterna ambicion y eterna guerra.

Qué así castiga Dios el alma osada
 Que aspira loca, en su delirio insano,
 De la verdad para el mortal velada
 A descubrir el insondable arcano.

Pessimism was grafted upon American literature by Edgar Allan Poe:

You are not wrong who deem
 That my days have been a dream;
 Yet if Hope has flown away
 In a night or in a day,
 In a vision or in none,
 Is it therefore the less gone?
 All that we see or seem
 Is but a dream within a dream.

It was naturalized in Australia, in its Byronic guise by Lindsay Gordon, in its Shelleyan mode by Henry Kendall; and finally its bitter seed, sown over the whole world by Byron, brought forth in Britain an aftermath of doubt in the poems of Arthur Hugh Clough, of remorse and horror in those of James Thomson.

The world rolls round forever like a mill;
 It grinds out death and life and good and ill;
 It has no purpose, heart or mind or will.

Thomson dedicated his "City of Dreadful Night" — the "Inferno" of the nineteenth century — to the memory of Leopardi.

Let us outline the character and career of the poetic pessimist as manifested in whole or in part by the examples just reviewed.

As a youth he starts out with high ideals of goodness and truth, of beauty and happiness. He believes in God, in love, in the unlimited power of man to improve himself and his surroundings. Full of enthusiasm, he is intoxicated with the wine of life, and his voluptuous nature, his undisciplined desires betray him into excesses that weaken his frame and confuse his intellect. In some fatal moment, through weakness of will, through some shock to his faith, some disappointment in love, the failure of some cherished

design, he loses heart; the ideal seems to mock him and he takes self-indulgence as his aim. Soon we hear him boast that his illusions have vanished, that he is disenchanted with life, that truth is unattainable by mortals, that beauty is deceit and virtue but a mask, and that the world is vanity. He dwells in melodious numbers upon the restlessness of desire, the transiency of delight: how soon it is swallowed up in weariness! — only pain is permanent. Grown old before his time, pitifully self-conscious and conceited, he begins to pour contempt upon the wretched age that brought him forth, holds it responsible for all his ills, and satirizes mankind. Increasing cynicism makes him suspicious and unsocial; he separates himself more and more from men and from their interests. His mockery grows bitter, then brutal, then senile, and ill conceals the fear he tries to smother. Death (he repeats to himself) is a release from misery; peace is to be found only in the grave; the future is a dreamless sleep like that out of which man came — and yet the fear that death does not end all consumes him; sleep forsakes him, and he sinks into the grave that he dreads and longs for yet young in years, unwept, unhonored.

GREENOUGH WHITE.